

**A.h.B. de Bono, MD.,**  
**Director of the International Institute on Ageing - Malta**

As Chairman of the Advisory Committee and alter Chairman of the Main Committee of the United Nations World Assembly on Aging in 1982, I presided over the drafting and debate on the International Plan of Action on Aging that was unanimously agreed by the World Assembly and by the General Assembly of the United Nations. I say this because during these meetings and during subsequent years I have had a unique opportunity to gain a very wide, and I hope relatively deep understanding of the aging across the world and particularly in the less developed countries.

The World Assembly on Aging was an historic landmark in the question of Aging as it focused for the first time the attention of policy-makers and governments throughout the world on the fundamental consequences of the transition in population aging that has been, and is being, experienced in increasing intensity in the developed world, and now, nearly two decades later, is beginning to affect, in a phenomenally rapid way, the populations of the less developed countries.

Although it was Malta that first raised the question of Aging in the United Nations in 1969, it was very much the United States that provided the impetus for the World Assembly to take place. It was, I understand, the first time Congress had urged a worldwide assembly on a particular topic -- that of Aging; and the United States throughout assumed an effective leadership role.

As you are well aware the shift from a pattern of relatively young to old populations is due, mainly, to a combination of increased longevity and decreased fertility. As people live longer, so their numbers increase both absolutely and proportionately. This, and the speed at which this transition takes place, has consequence of enormous importance both in socio-economic development and to individuals of all ages.

The less developed countries at the time of the World Assembly had 45% of the world's population over 60 years, and in 2025 it will be about 70%, when there will be over a billion people over the age of 60. Obviously these global figures hide a heterogeneous picture; but the most important and disturbing fact is that from now on it is the developing countries that will experience a very rapid ageing of their populations -- a much more compressed population transition from young to old, without the social, financial, health and educational infrastructures that the more developed countries have had the time and experience, money and incentive to develop over the past century or more.

Although it is true that in some developing countries there is still a tradition of care for the elderly within the family, the very process of development that has contributed both to longevity and decreased fertility (and therefore aging populations) has itself tended to destroy the extended family and to encourage migration towards the conurbations that development creates.

The World Assembly on Aging and the International Plan of Action on Aging certainly focused the attention of countries round the world on the question of Aging. However, although there have indeed been a large number of conferences on various aspects of Aging, and although excellent research has been carried out both in the bio-medical field and in demographic studies that have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of Aging, yet the enormous need for action and for creating not only an informed awareness, but also adequate and appropriate socio-economic infrastructures in the developing countries to meet the vast problems they will face due to aging populations in the next two decades and beyond, has been almost totally neglected, when one realizes the scale of the problem.

Action is needed now to avoid the predictable, but preventable, crisis that the rapid aging of the

populations of the largely unprepared developing countries would certainly cause.

The need for cadres of personnel trained in all aspects of aging, to influence and develop policies and help to build the necessary infrastructure in these countries,, and in their turn, to train others, is in my view absolutely paramount. It was with this in mind that I had inserted in the plan of Action the clause that enabled the United Nations to set up the International Institute on Ageing in Malta, ten years ago. Since that time a large number of long and short courses have been held at the Institute for participants from developing countries all over the world, and in situ courses organized in the developing countries themselves. These courses are conducted by the Institute's resident and visiting faculty of international experts.

The prime objective is to catalyse the interaction of the experience and expertise of the developed world, with the needs and aspirations of the developing countries to produce appropriate and sustainable responses. People who are most likely to be able to influence the development of aging policies and practice in their countries or communities are chosen for the courses. One advantage of the location of the Institute in Malta, quite apart from its excellent communications set-up, is that students from developing countries can see in practice what can be done in the field of aging in a country that is itself developing. Also it allows these courses to be run at very modest cost.

The in situ courses are always organized in collaboration with a local organization, either a government body, NGO or University. The demand for courses is tremendous, and seems to be growing as awareness of the impending tidal wave of aging dawns in countries that but twenty years ago would never have dreamt of aging as a national concern. The Institute has very limited resources and what is needed are more scholarships to be awarded to people from specific developing countries to enable them to participate in its courses.

The policy of my Institute is to enhance and extend the impact of its courses by distance learning techniques and the distribution of information packs of a practical nature in order to provide the necessary long-term continuity and support for individuals and groups in the developing countries. We are developing techniques of continued communication using the latest information technology in collaboration with a number of Institutes in developed countries. Indeed the Institute as a catalyst whose primary mission is to help implement the International Plan of Action on Aging, particularly in the developing countries is always willing and able to collaborate with any governmental or non-governmental or business organizations, to undertake courses and other activities in this regard. Over the past ten years we have accumulated a very considerable experience and network of contacts in the developing countries but in comparison to the urgent need we recognize that there is a vast amount to be done.

The problems of aging as they unfold with unprecedented rapidity in the developing countries are not only humanitarian but have serious socio-economic and therefore political, consequences. It is therefore very much in the interests of the developed world both in terms of geo-political stability and indeed international trade to help to ensure as smooth a transition to the new demographic realities of life in the developing countries as possible.

The World Assembly on Aging (1982) was largely due to the impetus of the United States; in 2002 it will be twenty years since that very successful meeting. Much has happened since then, and in particular the Aging of the populations of the developing world, particularly in the Pacific and South East Asia will have taken off in earnest. I would therefore urge the United States having in so many ways demonstrated its leadership and deep concern in the Question of Aging to consider once again requesting the Secretary General of the United Nations to re-convene the World Assembly on Aging in the year 2002 to review the past twenty years and to focus particularly on Aging in the developing

world.